

# A Partner for Parents

*Resources for Healing*



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A Program of South Shore Mental Health



## A Letter to the Community...

No one in our community is left untouched by tragic events. To varying degrees, tragedy affects and changes each of us.

As parents, we struggle with how to help our children and ourselves cope. We strive to be good parents and help our children transition through difficult times.

I hope that this booklet will provide you with valuable information and the resources to help you and your family.

The guide is for all families experiencing tragedy or loss. It provides ideas on how to talk to your children about difficult subjects and what behaviors to watch for in yourself and your children.

You'll also find information on ways to take care of yourself. In tragedy and in happiness, you are the most important person of your child's life.

Harry Shulman  
President and CEO  
South Shore Mental Health

## Seven Tips:

### Getting Through Difficult Times

**1** Talk honestly about the tragic incident. Without graphic detail, give clear, accurate information, and share some of your own feelings about it. Children and teens need to feel informed when they see their parents and other adults reacting to a crisis.

**2** Encourage children and teens to talk about their concerns and to express their feelings. Some children may be hesitant to initiate such conversation, so you may want to ask what your child has heard about the incident and how they feel about it. Validate your child's feelings. Do not minimize his/her very real concerns.

**3** Limit television viewing for younger children, especially those of preschool age. It is very difficult for your children to process the images and messages in news reports.

**4** Reassure children that they are being taken care of and identify all the people in their world who watch over them and protect them from harm.

**5** Help children to take action. Older children, especially, cope better if they can help those in need.

**6** Encourage your child to tell an adult about their concerns. Let children know they can talk to you anytime.

**7** Recognize what may be behind your child's behavior. Younger children may behave differently as a result of thoughts about the tragedy, however, they do not make the connection. Teens may minimize their concerns outwardly, but may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow school performance to decline.

## Feeling Anxious?

**A**nxiety affects your whole being. It has physical, behavioral, and psychological symptoms.

There are many situations that come up in everyday life for both children and adults in which it is important to react with some anxiety. If you didn't feel anxious in response to these everyday challenges, something would be wrong.

Be aware though, that some of the following prolonged feelings of anxiety may hamper your ability to complete everyday routines. Do not be afraid to seek professional help for children or adults who need help coping with anxiety.

### ***Signs of Prolonged Anxiety***

- ◆ Not able to express yourself
- ◆ Not able to go to work, school, shopping etc, as usual
- ◆ Unwilling to travel when required
- ◆ Changes in eating, sleeping, or working habits that cause problems
- ◆ Physical changes not related to disease (tension, headaches, stomach problems etc.)

## Take Care of You

**P**arents and adults in the community also experience extreme stress from a tragedy. Take this to heart and take care of yourselves and each other. Please: TAKE CARE OF YOU!

1. Remember, your feelings are normal reactions.  
Keep a routine - structure time - be productive.
2. Beware of using drugs and alcohol to numb the pain.
3. Give yourself permission to feel awful.
4. Reach out - people do care.
5. Keep a journal.
6. Talk to people. Spend time with others.
7. Accept help when it's offered. Seek help - even professional help - when it's needed.
8. Eat well-balanced meals.
9. Avoid excessive use of caffeine.
10. Don't push yourself, allow yourself time to recover.

## Long-Term Stress Response

Responses to trauma can vary according to the age of the child. Generally, children respond by either ignoring the problem or reverting to behavior typical of an earlier developmental stage. These responses are considered NORMAL if they are of brief (less than three weeks) duration.

Children who are having a difficult time coping may show any of the symptoms listed below at any age:

### Long-Term Stress Reactions

- ◆ Eating or sleeping problems, nightmares
- ◆ Headaches, stomachaches with no physical cause
- ◆ Behavior problems at home or school
- ◆ Startle reactions to loud noises
- ◆ Fear that the trauma will be repeated
- ◆ Withdrawal, decreased or increased activity level
- ◆ Decline in academic performance, without reason
- ◆ Depression or panic
- ◆ Prolonged sadness
- ◆ Confusion
- ◆ Accident prone
- ◆ Violent fantasies
- ◆ Inattentiveness
- ◆ Irritability

**The key is to watch for behavior that is unusual for your child.**

## AGE-RELATED RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

### AGES 1-6

Bedwetting	Crying	Excessive clinging
Thumb sucking	Wetting pants	Loss of bowel control
Fear of animals	Fear of crowds	Fear of being left alone
Speech difficulties	Re-enacts event	Wants to go to heaven *

### AGES 7-11

Bedwetting	Irrational fears	Irritability
Disobedience	Excessive clinging	Vision/hearing problems
Distractibility	Fighting	Refusal to go to school
Wanting to die *	Avoids talk of event	Re-enacts event

### AGES 12-18

Running away	Suicidal thoughts *	Stealing
Increased sleep	Violent fantasies	Avoids talk of event
Use of drugs	Use of alcohol	Sexual acting out
Aggressiveness	Relationship trouble	Risk-taking behavior *

Long-term stress reactions are natural responses of people who have survived a traumatic event. If the reactions last longer than three weeks, it may be beneficial to seek counseling help. Counseling will help a child or adult resolve feelings rather than reliving emotions and memories from the tragedy.

*\* Any suicidal talk or actions should be taken seriously. Professional help should be sought immediately. Younger children do not understand the permanence of death, so do not understand the consequences of "suicidal" behavior. Even very young children can become suicidal.*

## Kids in Trouble

Young people having a crisis may perceive their problems as inescapable and feel an utter loss of control. There are some common warning signs of trouble and potential suicide. When noticed and acted upon, these signs can reduce suffering and save lives.

- ◆ Suicide threats, direct or indirect
- ◆ Unexplained crying, sadness; feelings of worthlessness
- ◆ Obsession with death
- ◆ Dramatic change in personality or appearance
- ◆ Irrational, bizarre behavior
- ◆ Changed eating or sleeping patterns
- ◆ Severe drop in school performance
- ◆ Isolation
- ◆ Takes unnecessary risks
- ◆ Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- ◆ Withdrawal from friends and family
- ◆ Withdrawal from activities of previous interest
- ◆ Giving away belongings
- ◆ Cutting or burning oneself
- ◆ Previous suicide attempt

*Listen for a cry for help and show that you care.*

### How to Talk to Kids When Things are Tough

#### **The key is listening.**

*Continually validate their feelings and remain interested in what they're saying. Listening will eventually lead to having them hear you.*

## If you think a person might be suicidal, trust your suspicions and...

### **...Take Action. Remove Means. Get Help.**

- ◆ Be direct. Talk openly and freely about suicide. Ask if he or she is thinking about suicide.
- ◆ Seek professional help from a school counselor, nurse, physician, suicide or crisis center, therapist, hospital emergency team or community mental health center.
- ◆ Get involved. Be available. Show interest and support.
- ◆ Don't be sworn to secrecy.
- ◆ Be non-judgmental. Be willing to listen.
- ◆ Don't dare him or her to do it.
- ◆ Don't ask "why." Use constructive questions.